Sterling Murdock – Life during WWII

By Sterling Murdock

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Oral Interview conducted by Troy Miskin

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Brigham Young University – Idaho
TM: Ok, can I get your name?

SM: Sterling Murdock.

TM: Ok, and where were you born?

SM: Rexburg, Idaho.

TM: And how old were you when the war began? World War II.

SM: Ah, let’s see, ’41, ’47 on the calendar I would have been…Shoot, probably about a sophomore in high school, a freshman or sophomore.

TM: And what do you remember anything about that day when the war began?

SM: We didn’t have television then so you don’t have everything play by play like they do now. We had an old dome type radio that was run by a battery and when you’d turn it on it would squeal and holler at you for awhile until things got warmed up, and where you got your information at how everything was going was go to the picture show and they’d have a newsreel going before the picture show so as it got into closer to my turn the fellows that we had working for us they left when it first started in ’48 and ’40, ’40, ’41, and ’42. Russell Nash and Al Knutson, they went at about that time and when I got old enough to go to college I was on the draft board up there in Teton County and I wanted to come down and start college and they had a draft board says no don’t do that cause your next up in the draft. So that I was a graduate out of high school in ’48 and ’44 spring of ’44 and the fall of ’43. Let’s see that’s not right, correct me boy.

TM: Ok, so what did you think about it, like when you were drafting, when you were drafted?

SM: I thought we’d go and shoot the butt end off all of the Japs in the country. What else is there to think about?

TM: Ok, and where did you serve?

SM: I, (cleared throat) excuse me, I took my basic training in Camp Roberts, California, and I was there until spring so what’s that four or five months, and then we got out in, I come home on furlough anyway, first of, first part of May, last part of April, first part of May, had eight days furlough, and so we come home. I had a sweetie here at home that I’d been writing to all the time and, so rather than having all those letters go to waste and her kids around to read them I thought I’d see if she would marry me. So we left for Camp Roberts, we went to Paso Robles, that’s a little town that the soldiers would go to overnight.

TM: Ok, and what was you rank?
SM: Pretty stiff if I wasn’t passed up every night. I was Private First Class when I was, I was telling you about my sweetie so I’ll go back to that. So we went up there and at the jewelry store there and there was a big, big diamond ring and we bought it for sixty dollars and I had twenty dollars and each of them buddies each had twenty dollars that they lent me to buy this ring to send home so I got it and wrapped it up and they mailed it there and I didn’t put any note inside or explanation or who it was from so I got back to camp I wrote a letter and put it in the mail that same day, and I was sure that the letter would beat the package, ya know, and found out later that she said that she didn’t know who she was engaged to. She got the ring and decided that she’d keep it, first guy that came along and claimed it then that’s who she’d be engaged to. So, that’s the way that I got engaged to my wife and when I was still on furlough we took four days out of the eight days to buy the time we got our recommends and blood tests and everything and they didn’t just walk up and say I want to be married in them days they put ya through the grind, and if they weren’t quite old enough, the parents had to sign or ya didn’t get married. My wife she was old enough nobody signed for her, cause girls at eighteen you don’t have to, but I was only twenty so I had to be signed for. So, daddy signed my marriage certificate and so we’s home just long enough to have a…we stayed in Malad, first night out of Salt Lake, and then we came over here to Milo. They had a reception for us there and that was the second night and the third night we went up to Driggs, Bates, out west of Driggs was where we lived. We had another, oh, what do they call ‘em? We used to have, we called them a lot of different, anyway, we had another party for us there, then the next night I was in Idaho Falls at midnight to go back to the Army. So I was; I was as long as my furlough lasted. So, anyway to make a long story short, when I got home out of the Army then I wasn’t dead and my wife she was still my wife and so we went to live together. So, ok, now let’s go back to what? What’s my rank?

TM: Yeah.

SM: You know you don’t get any rank, you get it when you first get out of Basic, you’re all Private First Class. That isn’t even a mark on your shoulder, it’s just a…what’s on paper and well maybe they did give little slashes for First Classes. But when we get out of there then I wasn’t assigned any outfit when we left, went to Fort Ord, Camp Roberts, no, no, no, Fort Orden in San Francisco. That was the replacement depot that they’d ship you overseas or fly you to Germany or wherever they needed replacements. So, they loaded us on a ship, and it was an old Merchant Marine vessel and they wouldn’t get out and go like you see them do on television nowadays. It took us twenty-eight days to go to the Philippines in Manila, and it was a long old trip we’d go in the daytime we’d zigzag, at night boy they’d open that old girl up and every joint in her would be a popping and a snapping and go as fast as they could during the night then they slow down during the daylight, that was so submarines couldn’t get a direct hit on ya, made it harder anyway, so we got over in the Philippines. First part of June and we landed at their naval not for their dock in Manila there. But the harbor was so full with boats and ships, that sank in there that it just see smokestacks a sticking up out of water, probably a little more the top and then so. We had to stop out quite a little ways and get in the little trolley boats and go in through the smokestacks and sunken ships to get over to where they could land ya at and so we go there and we went on to the railroad station and they loaded us on
little troop cars, box cars they was about the size of a shoe box that got twenty guys in it. Yet they had a let’s see there was about a hundred, oh, two-hundred and something like that of us and so we went down to this little replacement depot down at Halabang, and we, they give us a bed and they put us on guard duty right quick. That first night that I got there I was on guard duty and boy in the jungles, ever see a plow boy in the jungles and get used to them birds and crickets a yelling and a snapping. It was pretty creepy. And then we had a post we would go down one side, across another side, then across the end so you were going in a V all night on this one corner. One of the other guys we joined them for a few minutes and so towards morning a flashlight would shine out but it would hit the ground right down in front of you. Then so you’s walking in the dark. This one time we met up with a guy up on the corner and we talked said he hadn’t seen anything or hadn’t heard of anything so we just left and gosh I hadn’t of been probably a hundred feet from him when boy he opened up fire and yelled Corporal of the Guard here come the guard out of the camp post where we was at officer and all of the boys that was on guard that night that was sleeping they come so I just kind of waited around there I didn’t go fast as I well I would just wait and see what was happen. If the jungle was full of Japs I didn’t want to be walking down into it. But I don’t mean Japs the way they would think of them nowadays, they’re Japanese. In that time all Japs looked alike we couldn’t tell one from the other they’s all so they, they was messing around there it kind of got daylight I went back up there to the guys that was messing around and asked what happened. They laughed and they said that there was a crashing in the jungle and the guy he owned up fire and he says that Uncle Sam just bought their selves a nice water buffalo. That’s what he got from the noise in the swamps, so anyways we were there for close to a week but you could hear the shooting going on up in the mountains just back aways it was close enough the replacement depots was close enough you could hear the fire going on and they call us out each morning it was the only time in my life I was glad that my name was lower down on the alphabet, cause it took them quite a while to get down to “M”. And they called so many guys what they needed for replacements for what they lost from the night before so each morning when you fell out you didn’t know if it was your turn or just what. And it happened to be that after we’s there for three or four days this one morning they called us out we and the whole works lined up out there for all that was left and we left the United States we had sixty head of prisoners with us that had been in the stockade area in the United States and they, their sentence was to go over there and they’d sent them to the shop troops down in Mindanao below the Philippines, and then they’d if they’d lived through that well then they’re released from their deal up here in the States so when they called us all out there them boys was taken too. So I know we was heading for Mindanao, that’s what I felt like and it’s on down below the equator and there’s an island there I guess I think that they’re still fighting there I don’t know. But we got down just, oh, we’s just about half a day from the equator and our ship turned around just like we’d forgot the Columbia Coffee, you could tell that it was turning sharp enough around nobody never knew anything they never told ya anything. You just went for the ride and finally the sailor boys got talking with one of them and he said well they had a need for replacements at island of Saboo. We’d gone through it about a half day before we, we turned around and come back pulled in and harbored there and so they we all unloaded and got into trucks different so many guys to a truck. And they had benches, out from the bed, Army trucks aren’t very wide and they had them
sittin’ and they had a cover up over ‘em and so we went up the hills towards the fighting was going and we got just about there and officer pulled out in front of us and the whole deal stopped next thing we knew we’s backin’ around and turning the trucks around so didn’t know where we’s going then and so they said we were going they were taking us back down to the ocean to set up camp for the – our call division was up in there fighting so that’s what happened so we went to, down in there and spent our time there and when the soldiers came down out of the hills they had they’d finished the fighting there so they come back there and was we got the guys that was there got assigned to different companies where they’d lost fellows. I got to go with “H company”. And we had the tents set up and there was twenty-four men to a tent, big long tents, twelve bunks on each side and so we had, we didn’t do any exercise and training like they was here in the States because over there they got a chance to rest they rested they didn’t get out and see how fit they could make you so we spent our time making beach heads what we call a beach head over in Formosa and we earned how to cook snakes and all those little things and eat them cause in Formosa there’s a lot of that kind of reptiles in their jungle. Well now before we left for Formosa we got a different plan we was going to go to Japan so we was assigned to make a beach head right in Ukum harbor. And so we spent our time, watch a show in the evening we had a big kind of a pit and fold seats around it and sit in there and look across at the film we was there one night and we’d loaded everything on the ship to go to Japan and we’d sent our food and everything there except just enough for your personal belongings and so we was gonna eat sea rations for a day and then we was gonna load on go while during the this, during the time there that typhoon come up. It come up across Okinawa and, oh, let’s see, on Okinawa it cut across the South Pacific and it caught us we were south of where the typhoon, typhoon was so we didn’t ship out for three or four days and so one night at the picture show, the Return of Jessie and Frank James, so we’d show and we’d seen it so many times that even you yelled and hoped for him even before he came into sight but they, come on the show on the screen the war is over Japanese have surrendered boy everybody jumped up and yelled and happy as if they’d had good sense and so then they drank everything they could find to drink they went into the infirmary and took their white alcohol mixed it with grape juice or juice boy it was and I went in and I went to bed, one boy he come in there and he had little juice in a glass and got opened up the little door there to put some more coal in or wood in and he said I wonder what this will do and he threwed it in that fire and it went SSSSSPPPHHHH. AHHHH I wonder what that was doing to my guts. It was sure full of power. But we landed there left there and headed for Japan and we was two or three days before we got to Japan and we pulled up I don’t even remember the day not when we got to Japan it had to be the later part of let’s see the first part of September and so we got over to the harbor and we pulled into it, shipped it and going up in there you could hear a pin drop it was so quiet everybody thought that they’d try to blast us out of the water because of all the dirty tricks they’d played and everything they had no just, just sacrifice their own selves or anything you know and it was so eerie and quiet that along the big harbor where you went in they had great big cannons up on the side and their barrels was up in the air but you could of drove a jeep down each one of those barrels we thought sure watching thought sure that one of them would drop down and karroon me but it didn’t happen. We floated right up into the, to the dock, walked down the gang plank thought we was white people again. And they – I was with the third outfit to land in Japan and they took my
outfit when we first got there sent us out to the airport to stand guard over the airport so they couldn’t be taking things out of the country or going in or so we stayed there for about two weeks until the fly boys got there and then they took over on their job of watching the airport. And we had just a matter of survival from there on till we had to after the Air Force come and took over our guard duty there then we went and was broke up into companies after you’ve been there two years well then your time was allotted time was up and they dismiss them to come home after the war was over so there’s lots of them outfits was had the old boys in there quite a long while and they was ready to come home so us new guys we got assigned wherever they needed somebody and I was assigned to the 123rd Black Cat Division and we went to Omenada that’s at the northern part of the island and they – that’s where the Jap’s was going to make their last stronghold. The Japanese is what they say now and so all of the honeybomb big lid airplane factories and one ton ammunition and another just everything like that just clear around that old hill and so we started in of cleaning these out. They’d haul them out, dump it in the ocean and guns whatever they you know whatever they had made after we’d dumped them in the water well they’d assigned me to – with the detail that goes out to furnace room, keep the furnace stoked up so I didn’t get to help them clean out the, the all whatever but we sure now the snow there you usually get about twenty-six feet deep they said and we stayed to right after or right about Christmas time or maybe after. So then we got, they got their hill cleaned out and so they decided to get us out of there well they could get out so we went back down to Tokyo, and we went to a replacement depot there and then they broke up our company and we joined some down there and there’s quite a lot of us went to a Quarter Master 363rd Quarter Master Division. And our part of the Quarter Master was we had four big semi’s with dryers and washers for our clothes, laundry clothes, and they’d bring them in with semi’s loads kick them off wherever they could. We’d wash clothes everyday and put them back in bags and send them back to wherever they come from so that’s what I got to do with my time till my time finally wore out. But I went overseas as a Private and over there then they made me a Private First Class, and then when we went see we went to H Company, no, no wrong, went over into Japan and that’s where we went to this company and they was sending all these guys home and so when we come back from winter time and so they got us assigned, I met this Italian fellow on the train coming back from up there and his, his, was fine fellow and we got kind of chummy and so the Sergeant, Platoon Sergeant told him he says you wanna good job. He says well I, I believe I know, he says what is it? He says well I need someone to replace me as Platoon Sergeant. And he says well I’m going home with you guys but if you know anybody else that make a Platoon Sergeant, and I told him yeah I would so Sergeant he come found me and he’s in the morning you come and stand up there with me to have you report, you’re gonna have my job. So I washed, I got a mirrors, I got up there the next morning and, I, my rank changed from First Class, Private First Class and when I come home out of the, when I graduated from, when I got my men left I was First Sergeant, about five months before I come home, but I couldn’t get my stripes because when the war broke they a lot of these officers was these just First class or Private you know they didn’t call them First Class they called them lieutenants and the Sergeant First Class they made more money than the lieutenants would and the non-commissioned officer they furnished all your clothes well the lieutenants they had to buy all their own clothes, so it was costing them quite a bit, so when they said that they done
that so they took our war from there and went to Korea and said if I’d sign up for a year in Korea, they’d give me my First Sergeant stripes and I told them I’d had to experience and them stripes didn’t mean that much to me cause I thought that it was my turn to go home and I’d better take it and they offered to bring my wife over and that’s no place to take your wife to you know. So, I come home and she so glad to see me when I got here.

TM: So, was it like after the war was over what was it, was like the United States any different?

SM: Oh, I don’t know what the feeling was. They, it was relief. Being the first or not the first but like if you needed a tractor or a car, see all of that was rationed you couldn’t just go into a dealer and buy them you had to get on the list and I’d signed up for tractor with all those outfits you know so far, (talking to someone else) there was relief because they was all signed up they couldn’t even buy sugar without rations. And it took the curse off the country.